

House UKS remap plan with Cenla compromise

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BATON ROUGE — The House on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved legislation that redraws members' election districts to accommodate shifts in state population and growth in some areas.

The 70-28 vote sends House Bill 1 by Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, to the Senate. The Senate on Tuesday also approved its redistricting plan, SB1 by Senate President Joel Chaisson, D-Destrehan, with a 27-12 vote and sent it to the House. Traditionally, neither has tinkered with the plan approved by the other body.

The approved House plan featured a major compromise among Democrats and Republicans that unified lawmakers in Central and North Louisiana.

A massive juggling act sparked by Rep. Rickey Nowlin, R-Natchitoches, brought those lawmakers together in a shift that involved eight representatives' districts. The realignment swapped precincts throughout the region and reshaped a new minority district in Natchitoches, DeSoto and Red River parishes.

The affected districts are currently represented by Alexandria Democrats Chris Roy and Herbert Dixon, Rep. Jim Fannin, D-Jonesboro, Rep. Billy Chandler, R-Dry Prong, Rep. Frank Howard, R-Many, Rep. James Armes, D-Leesville, Richard Burford, R-Stonewall, and Nowlin.

Roy credited Nowlin with ending a brewing battle over possibly undoing Monday's agreement to have districts represented by Reps. Roy, Dixon and Chris Hazel, R-Ball, contained wholly in Rapides Parish. He said that to accomplish the Rapides alignment, Nowlin and Chandler would be thrown into the same district, and the Republican majority in the House didn't want Republicans running against each other.

Roy told the House that Nowlin, who called him Monday night offering a compromise, was to be recognized as "a true statesman on this issue and helping to work this out."

Nowlin, who has repeatedly expressed concern about the House redistricting plan splitting Natchitoches and breaking up its link to the historic Cane River Territory and to Northwestern State University, volunteered to run in a newly created minority district, provided

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it could be sculpted to keep the Natchitoches region together.

"The end result is it helps all the districts," Nowlin told the House. He said he could go back home and tell all of his friends, black and white, that "we're together."

In presenting his amendment, Dixon pointed out several districts in which black voters outnumbered whites but white candidates were elected. He said Nowlin would have a good chance of being re-elected.

"This is not the district I would have drawn," Nowlin said. But he told the House, "I'm going to win that election with the help of God and my friends."

Rep. Robert Johnson, D-Marksville, said he escaped all of the controversy and his district will remain exactly as it is now.

Tucker told House members before the vote on HB1, "Unquestionably, this is the most difficult measure members face. I wish I could make all of you happy."

Most of those unhappy with the plan were members of the Legislative Black Caucus who wanted a new black district to be created in Shreveport. The district was not in Tucker's original bill but was added in committee, only to be removed Monday in a House vote on Shreveport Rep. Alan

Seabaugh's amendment.

The district would have forced Seabaugh to run against fellow Republican Burford.

Caucus members Reps. Dixon, Rosalind Jones, D-Monroe, Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, and Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport, said removing the district was why they couldn't vote for the bill.

"We've come this close," Dixon said. "It's the only thing that's missing. ... That's sad, because it's going to turn all this around."

Gallot, chairman of the House and Governmental Affairs Committee, said he believes that vote will cause the U.S. Department of Justice to reject the plan under the Voting Rights Act.

New districts are required every decade following the U.S. Census.

Some areas, like New Orleans, Cameron Parish and rural areas in the central and northern parts of the state, lost population. Other areas, like the Northshore area above Lake Pontchartrain and Bossier and Lafayette parishes, had population

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R-Natchitoches

growth.

During two days' debate on Tucker's HB1, regional disputes erupted, including fights over reshaping districts in the Monroe and Shreveport areas and a battle between neighbors in Orleans and Jefferson parishes. Many arguments had their roots in partisanship.

In the Shreveport fight Monday, an unusual alliance of Rep. Barbara Norton, D-Shreveport, and Republicans stripped a minority district that Gallot said was needed to comply with the Voting Rights Act.

Norton said creating the new district and reducing the minority population in her district from about 89 percent to 67 percent wasn't good enough to guarantee that she could be re-elected.

Representatives of other minority districts in the area said 60 percent

was sufficient.

By stripping the district, Seabaugh and Burford would no longer face each other in this fall's election. Gov. Bobby Jindal's chief of staff and executive counsel told Republicans at an early Monday morning meeting that preserving Republican districts was vital.

In debate Tuesday, Norton fought an amendment by Rep. Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport, that actually

increased the percentage of blacks in her District 3 by shifting a precinct.

"I'm confused," she said. "Do he want to represent District 3 or do he want to represent District 2?" which is Burrell's district.

"I'm a little bit miffed by Rep. Norton," Burrell said. His amendment also boosted minority representation by about 2 percent in his and Rep. Patrick Williams' districts.

Burrell's amendment was approved 59-34.

As amended, HB1 creates three new minority districts, one in the Monroe area, one in the Natchitoches region and one in Acadiana.